

**‘With a ballot paper in both hands’. The transformation of the Irish republican
movement from armed insurrection to constitutional politics**

by

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Abstract

The announcement in July 2005 by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) that it is effectively leaving the scene has been hailed as a major breakthrough in establishing a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. This article examines the transformation of the Irish republican movement from armed insurrection to constitutional politics. Before focusing on the current political context in Northern Ireland that led the IRA to announce its departure, this article analyses the circumstances that contributed to the emergence of the republican peace strategy. It is argued that the IRA’s decision to cease its paramilitary activities is the culmination of a process that saw Sinn Féin gradually eclipsing the IRA as the major force within Irish republicanism.

INTRODUCTION

On 28 July 2005, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) announced its end as an active paramilitary organisation: “The leadership of Óglaigh na hÉireann [IRA; T.K.] has formally ordered an end to the armed campaign [...] All volunteers have been ordered to dump arms. All volunteers have been instructed to assist the development of purely political and democratic programmes through peaceful means.”¹ This statement, read out by former IRA prisoner Seanna Walsh in front of a camera, was widely hailed as a major breakthrough in the search for a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. The British Prime Minister Tony Blair called it “a step of unparalleled magnitude”² while his Irish colleague, *Taoiseach* Bertie Ahern expressed his hope that the statement marks the end of “the tradition of using violence to advance political objectives.”³ After nearly four months of internal consultation, the leadership of the IRA finally answered the call by Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams to embrace only political and democratic means to achieve its republican objectives.⁴

While not denying its significance, it is clear that the recent initiative by the IRA marks the culmination of a process that saw Sinn Féin gradually eclipsing the IRA as the main force within Irish republicanism. In the early 1990s, Irish republicans began to explore alternative avenues to the armed campaign, acknowledging that there could be no military solution to the conflict in Northern Ireland and cognisant of their political marginalisation on an all-Ireland basis. The emerging republican peace strategy led not only to an IRA ceasefire in 1994 and a peace agreement in 1998, but also saw Sinn Féin becoming the major force within the (‘Provisional’) ‘republican movement’. After this, it became obvious that there would be no alternative to the eventual departure of the IRA if the electoral strategy of Sinn Féin was to be further

advanced. Before focusing on the current political context in Northern Ireland that led the IRA to announce its departure, this article analyses the circumstances that contributed to the emergence of the republican peace strategy and the gradual move towards constitutional politics.

The origins of the republican peace strategy

Although the republican peace strategy did not emerge until the early 1990s, its origins can be traced back to the beginning of the 1980s when the republican hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981 in the H-Blocks of The Maze / Long Kesh served as the catalyst for the greater inclusion of non-military means by the republican movement. Prior to this, republicans had come to terms with the reality that a military victory against the British Army was not achievable in the short term; therefore in 1978 the IRA announced that “we are committed to and more importantly geared to a long war.”⁵ In parallel with the recognition that a military victory was not immediately achievable, a group of republicans close to Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams increasingly emphasised the need for political activity in the Republic of Ireland where Sinn Féin was completely marginalised and little more than a supporter’s club for the IRA’s armed campaign.⁶ However, it was the election of Bobby Sands to Westminster Parliament (who eventually died along with nine other republican hunger strikers) that reopened the political space for republicans and propelled Sinn Féin into electoral politics. In a speech delivered at the Sinn Féin party conference in 1981 Danny Morrison argued for the participation of the party at elections and coined the famous phrase of the ‘armalite and ballot box’ that would shape republican strategy in the 1980s: “Who here really believes that we can win the war through the ballot box?

But will anyone object if, with a ballot paper in this hand and an Armalite in this hand, we take power in Ireland.”⁷

To further increase its electoral prospects the party decided in 1986 to drop the principle of abstentionism in the Republic, thus allowing for any elected Sinn Féin deputies to take their seats in *Dáil Éireann*, the Irish parliament in Dublin. This decision was taken in order to greater emphasise the all-Ireland context of republicanism and to escape the “marginalisation squeeze”⁸ of the British (and Irish) state.⁹ Hopes were raised among republicans that Sinn Féin’s presence in the *Dáil* would in turn protect the IRA from any repression by the Dublin government, as claimed by Martin McGuinness, now Sinn Féin’s chief negotiator.¹⁰ However, republican expectations of electoral success in the Irish Republic were short-lived. While in Northern Ireland the republican party consolidated its electoral base towards the end of the 1980s (consisting of around 35 percent of the nationalist electorate although with little prospect of overtaking the Social Democratic Labour Party; SDLP), it remained marginalised in the South, never gaining more than two percent at any General Election until the mid-1990s.¹¹ The reason for Sinn Féin’s very poor performance in the Republic was pretty obvious: the armed campaign of the IRA in the North presented a *structural obstacle* for the electoral prospects of the party in the South.¹²

In Northern Ireland from the mid 1980s onwards it became increasingly clear that on a military level, the IRA’s campaign had developed into a stalemate. On the one hand there was an acknowledgement that the IRA could not be defeated, although this was not necessarily the overriding priority of British strategies in the 1980s.¹³ On the other

hand the republican movement began to realise that the IRA could not defeat the British Army.¹⁴ The IRA intensified its campaign during the second half of the 1980s, but eventually there was growing realisation that Britain would not leave Northern Ireland at the point of a gun. Although surveys indicated that a majority of British people favoured a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland, the principle not to capitulate to 'terrorist violence' became a doctrine in the Northern Ireland policy of successive British governments.¹⁵ By the end of the decade republicans had to face the situation that while they could continue indefinitely with their armed campaign (but with little prospect of changing the military stalemate in their favour) their electoral prospect, in particular in the Republic, was structurally limited as long as IRA violence continued. In that sense it had become clear that there was a contradiction inherent in the 'ballot and bullet' strategy, as admitted by Richard McAuley, Sinn Féin's press officer: "We're not going to realise our full potential as long as the war is going on in the North and as long as Sinn Féin is presented the way it is with regard to the struggle and violence. I think that this is a reality that perhaps we weren't conscious or aware of back in the early 80s when we first got involved in electoral politics."¹⁶

The road to peace in the 1990's

The 1990s saw profound international changes that had implications for the ensuing Irish peace process.¹⁷ Among republicans a re-evaluation of the armed campaign and a search for alternatives began, not only because of a military stalemate in the North and Sinn Féin's continued political marginalisation in the South but also with regard to a new approach towards the Protestant/Unionist community in Northern Ireland. Republicans had always maintained that the primary dynamic of the Northern Ireland

conflict was one involving the IRA and the British state, an anti-colonial liberation movement versus a colonial power respectively. The perception of the Protestant/Unionist majority in the North was subordinated under the terms of this conflict matrix, not least because republicans viewed this community as “Irish people who wish to be subjects of the British crown for as long as that crown protects the Orange ascendancy.”¹⁸ However, in the early 1990s it became increasingly obvious to republicans that it was less “British colonial interference”¹⁹ but rather the consent of the Protestant/Unionist population that was the main obstacle to Irish unity.²⁰ Therefore a discursive change took place, which now saw republicans emphasising the need for a process of national reconciliation and rapprochement between unionists and nationalists.²¹ However it was evident that there had to be an IRA ceasefire to allow for this envisaged process. As a Protestant participant remarked at a Sinn Féin seminar in 1992, Sinn Féin’s calls for reconciliation and rapprochement “could not be heard above the deadly sound of gunfire.”²²

In the early 1990s the official discourse of Sinn Féin became increasingly infused with peace rhetoric to escape the contradictions of the ‘ballot and bullet’ strategy.²³ Attempts were undertaken by Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams to distinguish the republican party from the IRA when he declared at the Sinn Féin party conference in 1992: “We do not advocate violence and we do not interpret our vote as support for violence.”²⁴ This statement by Adams, in sharp contrast to earlier contentions (“If at any time Sinn Féin decide to disown the armed struggle they won’t have me as a member”; Adams 1986)²⁵ was an implicit recognition that the ‘ballot and bullet’ strategy was no longer seen as a viable option. The Sinn Féin leadership had to face

the situation that the more they talked about peace “the more the military campaign came to be seen as a part of the problem instead of being part of the solution.”²⁶

To escape the contradictions of the ‘ballot and bullet’ strategy and cognisant of the fact that on their own they were not able to achieve their objectives republicans began to explore the possibility of a pan-nationalist alliance with the SDLP and the Irish government. Only shortly before, they were denounced by Gerry Adams, who described the SDLP as a “fully fledged Catholic partitionist party” and alleged that the Irish government has become “the guarantor of partition and the jewel in the crown of British strategy.”²⁷ However, a “new realism” (Adams 1992)²⁸ led republicans to enter dialogue with the representatives of Irish constitutional nationalism to increase the pressure on the British government to disengage from Northern Ireland.²⁹ In particular, talks between Gerry Adams and then leader of the SDLP, John Hume, who acted as the de-facto representative of the Irish government, intensified throughout the early 1990s and became public in 1993.

The outcome of these talks was a document that was presented to the London government as the foundation for a joint public declaration together with the Irish government, which would precipitate in turn the announcement of an IRA cease-fire. However when the Downing Street Declaration (DSD), issued jointly by the British and Irish governments, was eventually published at the end of 1993 it fell short of republican demands in that it did not contain any indication of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland.³⁰ The British government officially acknowledged for the first time “that it is for the people of Ireland alone...to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent [and] to bring about a united Ireland if that is their wish.” However, the DSD also stated that the British government will “uphold

the democratic wish of a *greater number of the people of Northern Ireland* on the issue of whether they prefer to support the Union or a sovereign Ireland.”³¹ Therefore, apart from the discursive change by the British government in that it now publicly stated that the Irish people have a right to self-determination *should* this be the wish of the majority in Northern Ireland, this principle of consent, which underlaid all constitutional initiatives since the 1970s, was clearly reaffirmed by the DSD.³² Although republicans initiated a process of ‘clarification’, even rejecting the DSD at a special conference at the end of July 1994, the fact that the IRA ceasefire was announced one month later suggested that republicans had “in fact accepted the declaration under the very guise of having rejected it.”³³

Contrary to earlier belligerent declarations typified by: “We can state confidently today that there will be no ceasefire and no truce until Britain declares its intent to withdraw”,³⁴ the IRA ended its campaign without having achieved its traditional republican objectives. As Susanne Breen put it: “By calling a unilateral ceasefire – something they had pledged never again to do - the Provos [Provisional IRA; T.K.] tacitly admitted that their violence, not partition, was the biggest obstacle to peace.”³⁵ With the benefit of hindsight, it would seem the ceasefire was the culmination of the republican strategy of creating an “Irish nationalist consensus”³⁶ with the SDLP and the Irish government. From the time that republicans began to engage with Irish constitutional nationalism, it was clear that there was little alternative to a ceasefire in order for the continuation of the Irish peace process. In particular the then Irish Taoiseach Albert Reynolds acknowledged privately that Sinn Féin had to be included in the political process to achieve a lasting peace in Northern Ireland.³⁷ But for this, republican violence had to cease because it would have been unthinkable for any

Dublin government to engage in open political dialogue with Sinn Féin as long as the IRA campaign continued. Reynolds not only made it abundantly clear that the IRA would have to call an unlimited ceasefire, but after signing the Downing Street Declaration he even threatened to continue the political process with the British Prime Minister John Major without republican involvement should the IRA not end its campaign.³⁸ There was then little alternative for republicans other than to stay in a process which reaped the first rewards for Sinn Féin in early 1994 when the censorship laws against republicans were lifted in the South and Adams was granted a visa to enter the USA. More importantly, the continuation of the armed campaign would have perpetuated the political marginalisation in the Republic. But also in Northern Ireland there would have been little prospect of broadening Sinn Féin's electoral base as long as the IRA was engaged in a military campaign, which in turn was unable to break the stalemate. However, an IRA ceasefire was not the only prerequisite for republicans to enter the political process. It also *indirectly* presupposed the acceptance of the principle of consent, in republican terminology derided as the 'unionist veto', as the underlying foundation for any further negotiations.³⁹ The IRA had declared in its ceasefire-statement that "the Downing-Street-Declaration is not a solution nor was it presented as such by its authors."⁴⁰ However, the Dublin and London governments did not leave in any doubt that negotiations leading to a peace agreement could only take place within the parameter set by the Declaration, which stated that any constitutional change in Northern Ireland requires the approval of the majority of the population. Therefore, it could be argued that the continuing involvement of republicans in the political process indirectly symbolised a *constitutionalisation* of their position concerning its objective of Irish unity.

The Good Friday Agreement

Contrary to the fear articulated by unionists (and the hope of IRA members) no 'secret deal' had been reached between republicans and the British government concerning a possible British withdrawal. Although a few concessions to republicans were announced such as the reduction of British troops, the abolishment of censorship laws and the prospect of early release for prisoners, the only promise made to republicans was that Sinn Féin would be included in any negotiations for an eventual peace agreement.⁴¹ After the IRA ceasefire in 1994 it was three years before all-party talks for an agreement started in September 1997. In the intervening years the IRA temporarily ended its ceasefire when the British government and Unionists refused to begin political talks with Sinn Féin because of demands for IRA decommissioning (see below).⁴²

The outcome of the negotiations in the form of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA; also Belfast Agreement)⁴³ in 1998 could not have come as a huge surprise. Before the negotiations even started, the British Prime Minister Tony Blair made it abundantly clear that a united Ireland was not on the table: "My agenda is not a united Ireland – and I wonder just how many see it as a realistic possibility in the foreseeable future...A political settlement is not a slippery slope to a united Ireland."⁴⁴ Sinn Féin entered the negotiations in autumn 1997 after having signed the Mitchell principles of non-violence. While they pledged, "to smash the union,"⁴⁵ such statements were mainly directed at their own grass roots because there was never any possibility that the principle of the consent of the majority would not be enshrined in any final agreement, as was the case with the GFA. The other main features of the Agreement included a power-sharing executive and a new assembly with far-reaching political

competencies (devolution), a North-South Council with responsibility for implementing cross-border bodies and a British-Irish Council.⁴⁶ Because of its similarities to the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973 the GFA also has been called “Sunningdale for slow learner” by the SDLP’s Seamus Mallon.⁴⁷ Indeed, this has been one of the critiques levelled at the republican movement when at the time of the Sunningdale Agreement “the Provos categorically rejected it and rejoiced when the Sunningdale power-sharing executive was brought down. In the intervening years, around 2000 people died.”⁴⁸

In their assessment, republicans emphasised that the GFA is not a final settlement. According to Adams the Agreement “is a basis for advancement. It is transitional. It is an accommodation. It heralds change in the status quo. It is a transitional stage towards a democratic peace settlement. And it could become a transitional stage towards reunification.”⁴⁹ They also emphasized that the Agreement did not entail recognition of legitimacy of Northern Ireland.⁵⁰ However, these kinds of statements could arguably be viewed as part of a propaganda campaign to conceal just how much republicans had actually conceded not least in regard to the “great philosophical question of consent.”⁵¹ Indeed, most observers disagree that the Agreement presents the first step towards the reunification of Ireland.⁵² Not known for his support of republicanism, Henry Patterson provocatively states: “I would be the first to recognise the truly historic achievement of Gerry Adams...to reconcile subtly all but the most intransigent idealists to a settlement which contains nothing that can realistically be seen as even ‘transitional’ to a united Ireland.”⁵³ Not only is the Agreement testimony to the fact that republicans failed to achieve their objectives, it also does not reflect the traditional republican depiction of the conflict as a legitimate war of national

liberation against a foreign colonial power. The GFA does not define the British state as party to the conflict nor does it contain any reference to the role of the British Army as an army of occupation, as republicans always asserted. It simply states that the presence of the British Army in Northern Ireland is due to the threat of paramilitary organisations.⁵⁴ Rather, the 'consociational' character of the Agreement suggests that the 'Troubles' have been a kind of an ethno-national conflict between two conflicting communities.⁵⁵ Therefore the self-perception of the British state as an 'honest broker' between two seemingly atavistic tribes in Northern Ireland prevailed. This leads Anthony McIntyre, a former IRA member, and one of the foremost republican critics of the Sinn Féin leadership, to the following conclusion:

The political objective of the Provisional IRA was to secure a British declaration of intent to withdraw. It failed. The objective of the British State was to force the Provisional IRA to accept – and subsequently respond with a new strategic logic - that it would not leave Ireland until a majority in the North consented to such a move. It succeeded.⁵⁶

However, there were few alternatives for republicans other than to concede some ground. As has been argued so far, republican involvement in the political process did not only presuppose an IRA ceasefire but also a compromise on traditional republican positions with regard to the principle of consent and participation in a new Stormont Assembly. Republicans were simply lacking the political (or for that matter military) resources to succeed in incorporating their objectives in a final settlement. The dynamic behind the republican peace strategy was to overcome political marginalisation in an All-Ireland context after republicans realised that they could not change the military stalemate in Northern Ireland in their favour. This meant that Sinn

Féin would become the main force within republicanism, entering the political process north and south of the border, including their participation in the Stormont Assembly, a traditional anathema to republicans. Even though the IRA did not disappear after the GFA, the Agreement signifies the transformation of Irish republicanism from armed insurrection to constitutional politics. From now on the main project of the republican strategy was to increase the electoral share of Sinn Féin on the whole island of Ireland.

Republicans post-Agreement

Although republicans were not able to prevent an internal solution for Northern Ireland, they succeeded in overcoming their political marginalisation on an All-Ireland basis. Since the IRA ceasefire in 1994, Sinn Féin share of the vote has risen at *every election*, north and south of the border. In the Republic the party won its first parliamentary seat for forty years in 1997 and currently has five TDs (or deputies) in *Dáil Éireann*, the Irish parliament. In the 2001 Westminster General Election in Northern Ireland Sinn Féin achieved for the first time what they had hoped for since they first contested elections in the 1980s: to outmanoeuvre the SDLP and to become the strongest nationalist party in the region. This result has been repeated with an even higher share of the vote at the last Westminster Election in 2005. In the 2004 European Election the republican party gained a seat for the European Parliament not only in the North but also in the South where it made also large inroads at local elections. According to Martin McGuinness, further electoral successes could lead to “the situation where Sinn Féin is in government in the North and Sinn Féin is in government in the South. The logic is that the division of the country will have to end.”⁵⁷ That such a scenario is far from utopian became apparent in 2004 when the

Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dermot Ahern, gave the clearest indication as an Irish government official yet that if the IRA ceases all its activity and decommission its weaponry Sinn Féin could become a partner in government.⁵⁸

The decommissioning of IRA weapons hung like a Damocles Sword over the peace process in Northern Ireland. While republicans opposed such a move, all the other players, the British and Irish government, unionists and the SDLP, viewed it as *the* litmus test of a transformed republican movement that has left the military campaign behind once and for all. As early as 1993, preceding the IRA ceasefire, British and Irish politicians announced that as part of the peace process paramilitary groups would be expected to decommission their arms. Decommissioning was also the major issue that contributed to the breakdown of the IRA ceasefire in 1996, when the British government insisted that Sinn Féin could only enter talks after the IRA actually started to get rid of its weaponry.⁵⁹ When the Labour Party entered government in May 1997, it adopted a more flexible approach and promised that Sinn Féin would be included in political talks should the IRA ceasefire be restored, which happened two months later. However, the question of decommissioning did not disappear. In the Good Friday Agreement it is stated that all participants “use any influence they may have, to achieve the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms within two years.”⁶⁰ Sinn Féin argued that this section did not oblige them to deliver decommissioning which was beyond their reach anyway.

Immediately after the Agreement the IRA had ruled out decommissioning categorically.⁶¹ For republicans there were symbolic as well as pragmatic considerations why they initially refused to decommission. They see the IRA as an

undefeated army with therefore no obligation to surrender its weaponry. Hence, demands for decommissioning, in particular when they are issued by the British government and unionists, smack of humiliation. Some emphasised the continued need for armed defence against loyalist attacks which was the initial *raison d'être* of the Provisionals when they emerged in the turmoil of Belfast at the end of the 1960s. Last but not least the considerable IRA armament offered some leverage in negotiations to extract as many concessions as possible from the British government.⁶²

However, in the ensuing years the organisation became more flexible on this issue, not least because the absence of republican decommissioning became the major stumbling block for political progress in Northern Ireland. In November 1999, the IRA announced that it established contact with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD), thus enabling the formation of the Northern Ireland Executive which included two Sinn Féin ministers, 18 months after the Agreement was signed.⁶³ In 2000, the IRA declared that it will “initiate a process that will completely and verifiably put IRA arms beyond use”⁶⁴ to help to restore the suspended institutions of the Agreement. However, events outside of Northern Ireland accelerated the actual start of decommissioning in the following year.

In August 2001, three republicans, two of them former IRA prisoners, were caught with false passports in Columbia and were accused of helping to train FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia) guerillas. The Bush administration reacted furiously because the ‘fight against terrorism’ in Columbia had become an important issue in US foreign policy in Latin America. Bush even sent a special envoy, Richard Haas, to Northern Ireland to put pressure on the republican movement to ensure that these incidents did not re-occur.⁶⁵ Haas met Gerry Adams on 11

September 2001, a few hours after planes crashed into the twin towers in New York and the Foreign Capitol in Washington. He left Adams and the rest of the republican leadership in little doubt that republicans would not receive any more visas and would be prevented from fundraising in the USA should the IRA not start to decommission its weapons. Although republicans officially denied it, there can be little doubt that pressure by the Bush administration and the influential Irish-American lobby, which did not have stomach for anything associated with terrorism after 9/11, contributed to the start of decommissioning in October 2001.⁶⁶ However, it is likely that even without this pressure decommissioning of IRA weapons would have occurred anyway, although perhaps at a later stage. As it has been shown, the IRA had already moved on the decommissioning issue because it became clear that without any form of decommissioning the political process in the North would have remained stalled. And it was political progress that republicans were most interested in, now that Sinn Féin had become the major force within republicanism.

When the IRA announced that it had carried out the first act of decommissioning on 23 October 2001, its significance was lost on few because such a move was unprecedented in republican history and stands, as some republicans have admitted, in contradiction to the tradition of 'physical force' republicanism.⁶⁷ The start of decommissioning was further proof of a transformed republican movement that sees its future in contesting elections.

The final move by the IRA

Even though there can be little doubt that the republican leadership no longer regarded a return to the armed campaign as a viable option,⁶⁸ allegations about IRA activity continued to hit the headlines. In 2002 it was claimed that the IRA carried out a break-

in at Castlereagh police station in Belfast in which sensitive files belonging to the Special Branch of the reformed Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) were removed. Allegations that the IRA was running a spy-ring at Stormont where the Northern Ireland Assembly and power-sharing government are based, eventually led to the suspension of the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. After the fall-out from 'Stormontgate', Prime Minister Tony Blair made an important speech that became known as the 'acts of completion' speech in which he demanded that republicans "make the commitment to exclusively peaceful means, real, total and permanent."⁶⁹ From now on both the British and Irish government put the ball firmly in the court of republicans in that they made clear that continued IRA activities were the main obstacle to political progress in Northern Ireland. Two attempts to restore the devolved institutions failed in autumn 2003 and winter 2004 because unionists complained about a lack of clarity regarding IRA decommissioning.

However, two events in the North eventually brought about the IRA's statement that it would cease all paramilitary activities. Less than two weeks after a comprehensive deal on the political future of Northern Ireland had nearly been reached in December 2004, one of the biggest bank robberies ever took place in Belfast when £26.5 million was stolen from the Northern Bank. Although the IRA denied responsibility the Chief Constable of the PSNI, the British and Irish governments as well as all other political parties north and south of the border put the blame on republicans.⁷⁰ Public condemnation of Sinn Féin and the IRA was even more widespread when a Belfast Catholic, Robert McCartney, was killed in a pub-brawl that involved IRA and Sinn Féin members. His five sisters started a high-profile campaign accusing republicans of the murder of their brother as well as of the cover-up and intimidation of witnesses.

Their campaign reached a peak when US President George Bush received them on St. Patrick's Day in the White House, thereby increasing pressure on republicans.⁷¹

Republicans now had to face an unprecedented attack by large sections of the media and politicians in Ireland, Britain and the USA including some of its Irish-American supporters. Republicans must have realised that at this stage the IRA had become a liability to Sinn Féin which, instead of celebrating the party's centenary anniversary, was busy rejecting allegations of IRA criminality. It was in this context that Gerry Adams made his appeal to the IRA to transform into a new mode. His most compelling argument was the successful electoral strategy of Sinn Féin, as Brian Feeney persuasively argues: "Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness were able to pay off the IRA in the currency of electoral success and to demonstrate that the IRA was an obstacle to completing that success in the long term with a role in government north and south."⁷²

CONCLUSION

The recent announcement by the IRA that it is effectively leaving the scene marks the culmination of the republican peace strategy that gradually saw Sinn Féin eclipsing the IRA as the major force in republicanism. While recent events in Northern Ireland such as the Belfast bank robbery and the killing of Robert McCartney might have accelerated the IRA's move, there can be little doubt that even without these incidents the IRA would have eventually transformed into a new mode. The most significant move by republicans, in terms of a shift of strategies and tactics and also in terms of the wider implications for the peace process in Northern Ireland, was not the recent statement by the IRA, important as it was, but the ceasefire of 1994. This cessation, restored in 1997, radically transformed the political landscape of Northern Ireland and

eventually led to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. This Agreement signifies the transformation of the republican movement from armed insurrection to constitutional politics. Even though republicans did not admit it, their acceptance of the Agreement indicated that they had acknowledged for the first time, at least formally, that any change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland would require the consent of the majority of the population. Even though the IRA did not disappear after the Agreement, in retrospect it was largely a matter of time before it would start decommissioning and eventually leave the scene. The mere existence of the IRA as a paramilitary organisation is not compatible with Sinn Féin's long-term electoral strategy of becoming an important political force north and south of the border. The continued presence of the IRA would not only have made political progress in the North impossible but would also have hindered further electoral advances of Sinn Féin on the whole island, which became the main project of the republican peace strategy.

In Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin will take their ministerial posts in the power-sharing government when the devolved institutions of the Agreement are restored. This may happen in the autumn of 2006 when unionists might agree to share power with republicans, provided that the International Monitoring Commission (IMC) continues to confirm in forthcoming reports that the IRA has ceased all paramilitary activities.⁷³ Although unionists remain anxious about this, it is unlikely that republicans will not live up to their commitments. From now on any continued IRA activity would seriously undermine republican credibility and hence hinder the electoral prospect of Sinn Féin that has already received a boost after the recent IRA statement.⁷⁴ The IRA may not completely disappear but rather transform into an 'old comrade's association' dedicated mainly to commemorating republican deaths.⁷⁵ These kinds of IRA

activities could become legal in the South where Taoiseach Bertie Ahern has indicated that the ban of the IRA might be lifted if it ceases all unconstitutional activities.⁷⁶ Even though some IRA members might be unhappy with decommissioning and the IRA 'going out of business', it is highly unlikely that there will be any major defection to republican dissident groups such as the Real IRA or the Continuity IRA.⁷⁷ These splinter groups that are still engaged in sporadic, small-scale acts of violence, have failed to receive significant support even in republican heartlands. The reason for this is pretty obvious: the conditions that facilitated the emergence of the Provisional IRA at the end of the 1960s are no longer in place. The days of unionist one-party rule in Northern Ireland with Catholics effectively downgraded to second-class citizenship are long gone; nowadays Northern Ireland is on the verge of becoming a 'normal' society with not only paramilitary violence but also unemployment at an all-time low.⁷⁸ Some matters are still unresolved such as policing with Sinn Féin continuing to refuse to endorse the reformed Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). For some republicans, this is the most crucial issue, even more controversial than the recent move by the IRA.⁷⁹ However, as with decommissioning and the departure of the IRA, there can be little doubt that it is largely a matter of time until republicans will cooperate with the PSNI, thereby indicating a further normalisation of Northern Irish society.

An additional move towards the normalisation of security was undertaken with the IRA's statement immediately reciprocated by the British Army dismantling some of its military installations in Northern Ireland. While Britain is facing new enemies the armed conflict between Irish republicans and the British state is over.⁸⁰ Sinn Féin's General Secretary, Mitchell McLaughlin, spelt out the republican strategy for the 21st century: "The challenge we must rise to is to convince the electorate of the benefits of

all-Ireland political and economic unity and of our commitment to achieving it through our peace strategy.”⁸¹ Irish republicans will continue to struggle for a secession of Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom and for Irish reunification, but this struggle will be fought with a ‘ballot box in both hands’, within the institutional and constitutional parameters of the Good Friday Agreement.

Endnotes

- ¹ IRA, "Irish Republican Army orders an end to armed campaign," *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 28 July 2005. In this article IRA refers to the Provisional IRA that emerged in 1969.
- ² Frank Millar, "Step of unparalleled magnitude," *The Irish Times*, 29 July 2005.
- ³ Liam Reid, "Statement heralded 'a new era' for island of Ireland," *The Irish Times*, 29 July 2005.
- ⁴ "Gerry Adams addresses the IRA," *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 7 April 2005. Sinn Féin is the republican party that together with the IRA makes up the ('Provisional') republican movement.
- ⁵ "IRA – The people's army," *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 28 July 2005.
- ⁶ Gerry Adams, *Signposts to Independence and Socialism*, published by Sinn Féin, 1988; Henry Patterson, *The Politics of Illusion: A Political History of the IRA* (London: Serif, 1997), p. 187.
- ⁷ Liam Clarke, "Contemporary republican politics," in Brian Barton and Patrick Roche, eds., *The Northern Ireland Question: Perspectives and Policies* (Aldershot: Avebury), p. 88.
- ⁸ Anthony McIntyre, "Modern Irish republicanism: the product of British state strategies," *Irish Political Studies* 10 (1995), p. 115.
- ⁹ In the previous year the two governments had signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement, designed with the aim of strengthening the constitutional nationalists of the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) at the expense of republicanism and to further increase security cooperation. Paul Bew, Henry Patterson, and Paul Teague, eds., *Between War and Peace: The Political Future of Northern Ireland* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997), p. 63; Garret Fitzgerald, "Still making history," *Fortnight* no. 332 (1995), pp. 15-16.
- ¹⁰ Ed Maloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (London: Allen Lane) 2002, p. 293.
- ¹¹ Paul Mitchell, "The party system and party competition," in Paul Mitchell and Rick Wilford, eds., *Politics in Northern Ireland* (Colorado/Oxford: Westview Press), p. 98; Henry Patterson, *The Politics of Illusion*, pp. 206, 214.
- ¹² Although republicans were eager to emphasise censorship laws in the Irish Republic as the reason for their poor electoral performance, it was rather that the vast majority of the population in the South were at best indifferent, at worst totally opposed to the IRA's "armed struggle" in the North. Although there have been at times outpourings of sympathy with nationalists in the North, most notably after "Bloody Sunday" in 1972 when the British embassy was burned down in Dublin and during the hunger strikes in 1981 when two hunger strikers were elected to the *Dáil*, most people in the South became alienated from the "Troubles" and in particular from the IRA, which was fighting "in their name". IRA's "mistakes" like the Enniskillen bomb in 1987 which killed 11 Protestant civilians, led to outrage and disgust not only in Northern Ireland but especially in the Republic. Eamonn Mallie and David McKittrick, *The Fight for Peace: The Secret Story behind the Peace Process* (London: Reed International Books, 1996), p. 59.
- ¹³ As early as 1971 the Northern Ireland State Secretary Reginald Maudling acknowledged that the IRA could not be defeated, but that its violence could only be reduced to an "acceptable level." Henry Patterson, *The Politics of Illusion*, p. 219.

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- ¹⁴ Although there can be little doubt that republicans were still dedicated to continuing the armed campaign, a group, centred around Sinn Féin president Adams, viewed this form of struggle increasingly as the “cutting edge” of anti-British resistance with the aim of strengthening the position of nationalists in any eventual negotiated settlement. Adams claimed that the 1987 Sinn Féin document “A Scenario for Peace” was recognition that a permanent peace in Ireland could only be achieved through a negotiated settlement. Gerry Adams, “An unacceptable and intolerable standoff,” *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 13 January 1994.
- ¹⁵ Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, “From war to peace in Northern Ireland,” in Michael Cox, Adrian Guelke and Fiona Stephen, eds., *A Farewell to Arms? From Long war to Long Peace in Northern Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 33.
- ¹⁶ Patterson, Henry, 1997 p. 239. The contradictions of the ‘ballot and bullet’ strategy was symbolised by the correlation of a sequence of failed IRA operations, which resulted in the deaths of high numbers of civilians, and the decline in Sinn Féin’s electoral performances, see Ed Maloney, “Mistaken strategy,” *Fortnight* No. 273 (1989), p. 9.
- ¹⁷ While the reasons for the IRA ceasefire were primarily of indigenous character the major international political change after 1989 also played an important part in the emergence of the Irish peace process. The end of the Cold War facilitated the emergence of many peace processes in the 1990s. This “Zeitgeist of peace processes” (Guelke) did not fail to impact on Irish republicans. Above all, the commencement of peace negotiations in South Africa contributed to republicans questioning their armed campaign not least because they always emphasized their solidarity with the African National Congress, see Adrian Guelke, “‘Comparatively peaceful’: South Africa, the Middle East and Northern Ireland,” in Michael Cox, Adrian Guelke and Fiona Stephen, eds., *A Farewell to Arms?*, pp. 223-233. Also in the 1990s Northern Ireland became one of the key issues in Clinton’s foreign policy. Clinton’s decision to grant Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams a visa to enter the USA in early 1994, while infuriating British Prime minister John Major, greatly contributed to the IRA’s ceasefire some months later Cox, Michael, “Bringing in the ‘international’: the IRA’s ceasefire and the end of the Cold War”, in Cox Michael, Adrian Guelke and Fiona Stephen, eds., *A Farewell to Arms?*, p. 255. Another international factor impacting on the Irish peace process was the process of European integration that not only helped to transform British-Irish relations for the better but “as Ireland became more part of Europe, the old nationalist dream of making the country whole once again looked increasingly irrelevant.” *Ibid.*, p. 257.
- ¹⁸ Gerry Adams, *The Politics of Irish Freedom* (Dingle: Brandon Books, 1986), p. 125.
- ¹⁹ “A scenario for peace,” published by Sinn Féin, 1987.
- ²⁰ At the beginning of the 1990s the State Secretary for Northern Ireland, Peter Brooke declared that “[t]he British government has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland: our role is to help, enable and encourage.” Brendan O’Brien, *The Long War: The IRA & Sinn Féin from Armed Struggle to Peace Talks* (Dublin: O’Brien’s Press, 1995), p. 211. The reconciliatory tone of this remark which stood in stark contrast to earlier statements by the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (“Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom –as much as my constituency is.” Paul, Bew, Henry Patterson and Paul Teague, eds., *Between War and Peace*, p. 52). did not miss its effect on republicans and helped to convince them that the major stumbling block to Irish unity is less the British government but around one million Protestants/unionists in Northern Ireland.
- ²¹ Mitchell McLaughlin, “Ceasefire should be no precondition for talks,” *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 10 September 1992.
- ²² Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles. Ireland’s Ordeal 1966-1995 and the Search for Peace* (London: Hutchison) p. 339.
- ²³ “Plans for peace in the 1990s,” *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 29 March 1990.

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- 24 Gerry Adams, "Presidential Address," *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 27 February 1992.
- 25 Anthony McIntyre, "Modern Irish Republicanism," p. 101.
- 26 Mark Ryan, *War and Peace in Ireland: Britain and the IRA in the New World Order* (London: Pluto Press, 1994), p. 14.
- 27 Gerry Adams, *The Politics of Irish Freedom*, pp. 110, 106.
- 28 Gerry Adams, "Presidential Address 1992."
- 29 This was spelled out in the TUAS document that was circulated within the republican movement in the summer of 1994 to justify a ceasefire. Accordingly, republicans should aim for "an Irish nationalist consensus with international support on the basis of the dynamic contained in the Irish Peace initiative." TUAS Document, in Ed Maloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, p. 498. This document is a good example of the ambiguity that characterised many aspects of the republican peace strategy. While TUAS was known as Tactical Use of Armed struggle within the IRA it was sold as Totally UnArmed Strategy to Sinn Féin's allies. *Ibid.*, p. 570.
- 30 This was also the only point on which Adams and Hume did not reach agreement. Ed Maloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, p. 411.
- 31 Brendan O'Brien, *The Long War*, p. 369, emphasis added.
- 32 Giving a cautious welcome to the DSD, Adams tried to make the point that one of the conclusions of the Hume/Adams talks had been that unionists did not have a veto in regard to Irish national self-determination but that their consent for eventual constitutional change of Northern Ireland would be necessary. Gerry Adams, "An unacceptable and intolerable Stand-off." However, this seemed to be a contradictory statement as "the unionist right to consent is precisely what republicans have always claimed constituted that veto." Anthony McIntyre, *Modern Irish Republicanism*, p. 116.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 IRA, "We will break Britain's will," *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 17 August 1989.
- 35 Suzanne Breen, "Déjà vu all over again," *Fortnight* No. 332 (1994), p. 7.
- 36 TUAS Document, in Ed Maloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, p. 570.
- 37 John Darby and Roger Mac Ginty, *The Management of Peace Processes* (Basingstoke/Oxford: Macmillan, 2000), p. 62.
- 38 Paul Bew, Henry Patterson, Paul Teague, *Between War and Peace*, p. 210.
- 39 Republicans called the principle of consent a "unionist veto" because in 1922 Northern Ireland's borders were deliberately drawn to permanently secure a Protestant-Unionist majority.
- 40 IRA, "Seize the moment for peace," *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 1 September 1994.
- 41 Suzanne Breen, "Déjà vu all over again," p. 7.
- 42 This return to violence in 1996-1997 was not on the same scale as the previous armed campaign. The aim was less the traditional republican objective of a British withdrawal from the North but more to literally bomb the inclusion of Sinn Féin into political talks. As soon as the new Labour government promised that Sinn Féin would be included into these talks the IRA restored its ceasefire.

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- 43 The agreement is accessible at <http://www.nio.gov.uk/agreement.pdf>, (Last accessed 1 August 2005).
- 44 Paul Bew, Henry Patterson, Paul Teague, *Between War and Peace*, pp. 217, 219.
- 45 Paul Bew and Gordon Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles 1968-1999* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1999), p. 349.
- 46 For a more detailed discussion on the Good Friday Agreement see Ruane, Joseph and Jennifer Todd, *After the Good Friday Agreement. Analysing Political Change in Northern Ireland*, (Dublin: University College Press, 1999) and Rick Wilford, ed., *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 47 Alvin Jackson, *Ireland 1798-1998: Politics and War* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 408.
- 48 Breen, Suzanne, "On the one road," in *Fortnight 30th Anniversary Special* (2000). However, there are some major difference of crucial importance between the two agreements. Contrary to 1974 this time the political representatives of the major paramilitary organisations were involved in the negotiations leading to the signing of the Agreement, a precondition for a successful peace process (John Darby and Roger Mac Ginty, *The Management of Peace Processes* (Basingstoke/Oxford: Macmillan, 2000). In addition the level of violence in Northern Ireland in 1998 was dramatically different than at the time of Sunningdale. Last, but not least, the international context which facilitated the emergence of the Irish peace process in the 1990s was non-existent twenty years previously.
- 49 Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (Basingstoke/Oxford: Macmillan, 2003), p. 300.
- 50 Gerry Adams, "Presidential Address," 14 May 1998.
- 51 Anthony McIntyre, "Modern Irish republicanism and the Belfast Agreement: chicken coming home to roost, or turkeys celebrating Christmas," in Rick Wilford, ed., *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement*, p. 217.
- 52 Austin Morgan, for instance, examined the Agreement from a legal perspective and concluded that the Union between Northern Ireland and Britain has rather been strengthened than weakened. Austin Morgan, *The Belfast Agreement: A Legal Analysis* (Belfast: Belfast Press, 2000).
- 53 Henry Patterson, "Towards 2016," *Fourthwrite* No. 1 (2001), p. 5.
- 54 *The Agreement*, Section 8 "Security", <http://www.nio.gov.uk/agreement.pdf>
- 55 For an analysis of the consociational character of the Good Friday Agreement see Donald Horowitz, "Northern Ireland's Agreement: Clear, consociational and risky," in John McGarry, ed., *Northern Ireland and the Divided World: Post-Agreement Northern Ireland in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 56 Anthony McIntyre, "Modern Irish Republicanism and the Belfast Agreement," p. 205.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Mark Brennock, "FF signals willingness to form coalition with SF," *The Irish Times*, 1. June 2004.
- 59 Richard English, *Armed Struggle*, pp. 288-289, 325-326.
- 60 *The Agreement*, Section 7 "Decommissioning"

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- 61 IRA, "The IRA's response," *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 30 April 1998.
- 62 Richard English, *Armed Struggle*, p. 335.
- 63 The IICD has been set up under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement to oversee the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons in Northern Ireland. The leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, David Trimble, only agreed to share power with republicans and to become the First Minister of Northern Ireland after the IRA had entered into dialogue with the IICD.
- 64 Robbie Smith, "11 years of IRA support for process", *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 28 July 2005.
- 65 The "Columbia affair" was not over quickly, at least as far as the Bush administration was concerned. When the IRA issued its recent statement declaring its end as an active paramilitary organisation it is understood that Martin McGuinness, Sinn Féin's chief negotiator, had to give assurance to Bush's new special envoy Mitchell Reiss that the IRA would sever all links to foreign paramilitary and terrorist organisations. Conor O'Cleary, "Welcome for 'historic statement,'" *The Irish Times*, 29 July 2005.
- 66 Alan Ruddock, "How America held the IRA over a barrel", *The Observer* 28 October 2001; "US attacks 'central' to IRA move", *Irish News*, 24 October 2001.
- 67 Kieran McDaid, "IRA helped keep peace process alive," *The Irish News*, 25 October 2001.
- 68 This might not necessarily have been the view of all IRA members at this stage. According to Ed Maloney, many rank and file IRA members were not in favour of a ceasefire when it was declared in 1994. Ed Maloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, pp. 430-431. However, the republican peace strategy was very much a leadership-driven process as Maloney points out in his book.
- 69 Tony Blair, "Blair calls on IRA for lasting peace in the North," *The Irish Times*, 18 October 2002.
- 70 Dan Keenan, "Make or break for peace process," *The Irish Times*, 22 January 2005.
- 71 Conor O'Cleary, "Politicians harden demands on IRA to disband," *The Irish Times*, 18 March 2005.
- 72 Brian Feeney, "Adams succeeded where Dev failed", *The Irish News*, 29 July 2005.
- 73 Gerry Moriarty, "If words are matched by action a new government could follow," *The Irish Times*, 29 July 2005.
- 74 According to a recent poll, conducted after the IRA statement, almost fifty percent of voters in the Irish Republic stated that they would be "happy to see Sinn Féin in a coalition government now." This poll also showed that Sinn Féin can expect to make significant gains at the next general election in the South. Pat Leahy, "Poll shows that SF is set to make political gains," *Sunday Business Post*, 7 August 2005.
- 75 Angelique Chrisafis, "Men in green blazers? The future of the IRA?," *The Guardian*, 29 July 2005.
- 76 Liam Reid, "IRA must change before the ban is lifted, says Taoiseach," *The Irish Times*, 1.8. 2005.
- 77 Suzanne Breen, "Silencing the guns for good," *The Irish Times*, 25 January 2003.
- 78 Barry Gardener, "NI talks crucial to economic growth," *The Irish Times*, 27 August 2004.

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- ⁷⁹ Dan Keenan, “It is what we fought a war against,” *The Irish Times*, 30 July 2005.
- ⁸⁰ The bitter irony that the IRA was announcing its departure only a few weeks after the bomb attacks by home-grown Islamic fundamentalists in London on 7 July 2005 was not lost on some. See, for example, Jonathan Freedland, “A nightmare ends, another nightmare begins,” *The Guardian*, 29 July 2005.
- ⁸¹ “Easter 2001”, *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 19 April 2001.